

NOT YOUR PARENTS' HISTORY PROFESSORS: AN INTRODUCTION TO THREE DIGITAL HUMANISTS

by Elizabeth Mead Cavert Scheibel

In discussions of open access⁶⁸ and academic publishing, it can often seem as though there are just two sides, for and against, and that these groups are easily delineated into two camps: consumers and creators. The consumers are the students, libraries, and other readers and researchers who want increased access to journal articles, monographs, and other work, and they want that access to be free and immediate. The creators are the scholarly authors who write these works and the publishers and vendors who disseminate them. These are people who have relied on traditional publishing methods as a means to give creditability to their work, to come by prestige, and to profit.

However, this dichotomy does not reflect today's academic world, even in the disciplines of the humanities, which have been slower to embrace new publishing models than the sciences. There are growing numbers of humanities scholars, who view open access publishing as a probable, and even desirable, future. The work and perspectives of three historians are encouraging examples of how scholars in the humanities might come to view open access.

Dan Cohen⁶⁹, Tom Scheinfeldt⁷⁰, and Mills Kelly⁷¹ all work in the Center for History and New Media⁷² at George Mason University, in Fairfax, Virginia, USA. According to its website, "CHNM uses digital media and technology to preserve and present history online, transform scholarship across the humanities, and advance historical education and understanding"⁷³. The three men, who describe themselves as "digital humanists," are also trained historians: they teach classes and interact with students as members of the history department faculty. Their commitment to exploring and expanding the interactions between technology and history moved them to start producing a podcast in March of 2007. This podcast, Digital Campus⁷⁴, is "a biweekly discussion of how digital media and technology are affecting learning, teaching, and scholarship at colleges, universities, libraries, and museums". Open access is a topic that comes up often in conversation on the podcast, and on each of the scholars' blogs (linked at the beginning of this paragraph).

On Digital Campus, Cohen, Scheinfeldt, and Kelly have expressed their enthusiasm for open access and frustration for those in their field who object to any changes to the traditional publishing model. In their open access advocacy, these scholars offer a mix of "practical and political", in Scheinfeldt's words⁷⁵. Cohen describes the practical side this way: "1) it's a public good to put scholarship out there rather than behind gates; 2) it's an efficient use of today's technology; 3) it makes no sense from a pragmatic standpoint to have closed access scholarship; 4) it's better for the producers as well as the consumers." Scheinfeldt adds, "if the point of research, scholarship, and education is to in-

⁶⁸ "Information content made freely and universally available via the Internet in easy to read format, usually because the publisher maintains online archives to which access is free or has deposited the information in a widely known open access repository. Open access is a new model of scholarly publishing developed to free researchers and libraries from the limitations imposed by excessive subscription price increases for peer-reviewed journals, particularly in the sciences and medicine. By breaking the monopoly of publishers over the distribution of scientific research, open access makes access to scientific information more equitable and has the added advantage of allowing the author to retain copyright." http://lu.com/odlis/odlis_O.cfm (06.03.2009)

⁶⁹ <http://www.dancohen.org/> (06.03.2009)

⁷⁰ <http://www.foundhistory.org/> (06.03.2009)

⁷¹ <http://edwired.org/> (06.03.2009)

⁷² <http://chnm.gmu.edu/> (06.03.2009)

⁷³ <http://chnm.gmu.edu/about/> (06.03.2009)

⁷⁴ <http://digitalcampus.tv/> (06.03.2009)

⁷⁵ Unless a quote refers to a specific episode of the podcast, all statements referred to in this article are from emails to the author, sent between December 29, 2008 and January 5, 2009.

crease and extend knowledge, then making knowledge available to the most people on the most open terms only makes sense.” Kelly’s comments extend these ideas by saying, “As scholars we have an obligation to make our work as much a part of the ongoing conversation taking place online as we can. If there is a gap between ‘scholars’ and ‘the public’ then I think we’ve really fallen down on the job.”

There is also a more mission based, ethical argument for open access, which Scheinfeldt calls the political side of his beliefs on the subject: “politically, all of us (scholars, cultural heritage professionals, educators) are supported by public funds, either directly by state institutions and grant making agencies or indirectly through the tax code which heavily favors all universities and cultural heritage institutions. If the public is paying for our work, then the public should share some ownership in the results.” Kelly agrees, going so far as to call open access an obligation: “I think that as scholars we have an obligation to make our work as freely available as possible, and so open access is an obligation, especially for work supported in any way by money from the taxpayer.”

The idea that institutions receiving public money should provide public access is raised in a Digital Campus podcast, Episode 32 in September of 2008.⁷⁶ During the regular news roundup, the men react to the news that the U.S. House of Representatives was considering legislation to reduce public access to research funded by the National Institutes of Health through an NIH database hosted at PubMed Central. There is disgust and disappointment in their voices as they express their opinions that limiting public access to research paid for by the public with taxpayer money is not acceptable. Kelly goes so far as to call it “criminal,” pointing out that other, poorer countries rely on information in that database in their scientific communities. The bill, H. R. 6845⁷⁷, was sent to the House Committee on the Judiciary.

Cohen, Scheinfeldt, and Kelly are aware that their positions on open access are not widely held in the humanities. When asked about the gap on these issues between humanities and sciences, Cohen was clear: “Yes, there’s a gap. It’s probably because 1) scientists have always been more tech savvy; 2) there is a long tradition of monographs in fields like lit and history, whereas the article rules in STM [science, technology, and medicine]; 3) humanities scholars tend to be more on the luddite side of things--i.e., a lot of my colleagues think that tech is ruining the humanities.” Scheinfeldt agreed and went on to say, “Dan is right on about the differences between the culture of scientific publication and that of humanities publication. I’d add the fact that at least since the 19th century when science started to become “big science,” science has been a necessarily collaborative business requiring efficient modes of communication and knowledge sharing. There’s also a special premium placed on priority in the sciences, which drives scientists to publicize their discoveries as quickly as possible.”

To date, it remains unclear what large scale open access publishing in the humanities would look like. This topic is addressed in Digital Campus Episode 29, from July of 2008,⁷⁸ during which Kelly speaks about his recent blog posts regarding making digital scholarship count in the academic world. Kelly makes a distinction between digital work and digital scholarship, saying that digital scholarship must have the same characteristics as print scholarship: the work is a product of research, is embedded in a conversation among scholars, is peer reviewed, is made public, and has an argument. Scheinfeldt adds that “if scholars and other people working at universities and libraries and museums are making an argument that the nature of scholarly and academic work has changed with digital technology, I think that they have to be willing to accept that the models and terms of academic employment may also change with that” in regards to tenure and non-tenure positions - a change he feels is completely acceptable. Cohen expresses concern that even with these kinds of changes, the standard narrative format, linear text, is still privileged above other formats. Kelly notes that scholars are in a period of transition, and therefore those wishing to have digital scholarship or scholarship outside

⁷⁶ <http://digitalcampus.tv/2008/09/> (06.03.2009)

⁷⁷ <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c110:H.R.6845>: (06.03.2009)

⁷⁸ <http://digitalcampus.tv/2008/07/03/episode-29-making-it-count/> (06.03.2009)

the traditional linear format may have to explain the validity of this work to hiring or tenure committees. All three agree on the idea of “meeting them halfway” in terms of getting new forms of scholarship accepted, a plan that can certainly be applied by those wishing to gain acceptance for open access publishing.

The works of Cohen, Scheinfeldt, and Kelly, including the Digital Campus podcast and projects at the Center for History and New Media, are an important addition to the academic humanities conversation. They recognize and discuss the changes already happening in their fields in order to evaluate how the humanities community can best position itself to thrive in the future, and they make it clear that it is necessary for the humanities to embrace and be actively involved in shaping change, instead of only voicing objections. The arguments for open access to scholarly work in the humanities are indeed both practical and political. These digital humanists recognize that such a major shift in publishing will have to answer questions about access, how new publishing models fit in with tenure and faculty activities, and how to maintain credibility and the highest standards for publishing. Such questions cannot be left only to publishers and vendors to decide; other humanities scholars must engage in these discussions so that their ideas and interests can help shape the future of the field.